



Carolina star-moss
CHARLES BRASWELL JR.



Pringle's moss
BILL LEA

Star-moss

Most plants cannot survive in the turbulent environment that waterfalls create. However, a few rare ferns and mosses find the wild, moist habitat to their liking. The Carolina star-moss, which grows in dark-green rosettes, clings to spray cliffs in the river basin. It is known outside the Southern Appalachians only in the Dominican Republic. Similarly, Pringle's moss, which attaches to rocks under running water, is found elsewhere only in Mexico. Scientists aren't sure how such species exist so far from the tropics. Some suggest that spores were blown from afar. Others theorize that the plants may be remnants from the continent's warmer periods tens of thousands of years ago.



green salamander
WAYNE VAN DEVENDER

special designations effectively blocked a hydroelectric power plant proposed on the river in the 1980s. The Whitewater River lays claim to the 411-foot Whitewater Falls, the tallest and most voluminous waterfall east of the Rockies. The basin also contains several manmade lakes, the largest of which is a popular resort, Lake Toxaway.

More than half the basin's land lies in federal ownership, most within the Nantahala National Forest. Gorges State Park spans 7,100 acres of the Toxaway and Horsepasture river gorges. Nearly 125 rare plant and animal species that occur in the mountain counties of North Carolina are found in the park. With its diverse mix of rocky outcrops, high-elevation forests, streams and waterfalls, this ecologically rich region has been deemed of national ecological significance by the state's Natural Heritage Program.

The basin has three rare endemic fish species, including the turquoise darter, redeye bass and the rosyface chub. Endemic means a species is restricted to only one place or region in the world. These three fish have been found only within Gorges State Park. The forests of the basin's large, rocky ravines contain the largest population of the Swainson's warbler in the North Carolina mountains. The largest population of the green salamander in the state is found here too; the species is state-listed as an endangered species. This secretive salamander lives in the damp, shaded crevices of cliff faces. The Southern Appalachian saw-whet owl and Rafinesque's big-eared bat (mountain subspecies) are state-listed as threatened, and the peregrine falcon is state-listed as endangered.

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Swimmers on the
Horsepasture River